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ABSTRACT

Undergraduate practicum programs at 291 departments of psychology were surveyed using a 37-item questionnaire and information obtained from the 1970 census and the American Psychological Association's "Graduate Study in Psychology" (1981). Sixty-five of the departments claimed to have a practicum program. Departments offering the Ph.D. were significantly less likely to have a practicum program than departments offering only bachelor's or master's degrees, and departments at small schools were more likely to offer a practicum. In addition, schools in the South were less likely to offer practicums. More than 80 percent of the departments started their practicum programs in 1970 or later, and 38 percent started since 1975. About one-third to one-half of the departments having a practicum program used one department member, and most utilized three or fewer members. Both career development and a more liberal arts orientation of seeing in action the theoretical material of courses were cited as important purposes of the practicum. Students generally must complete course prerequisites, interviews, and other selection procedures before being accepted to practicum programs. About 3 hours of work per week at an agency were required of students for each 1 hour of credit. About one-half of departments required some form of regular classroom meetings. Grades were typically based on a combination of supervisor ratings, daily journals, papers, on-site visits, and seminar participation. The most common problems were lack of local administrative support and poor supervision at the agency level. Variety in the practicum programs and little consistency in departmental management or quality control were found. (SW)

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A NATIONAL SURVEY OF UNDERGRADUATE PRACTICUM PROGRAMS

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A NATIONAL SURVEY OF UNDERGRADUATE PRACTICUM PROGRAMS

The availability of an undergraduate practicum, internship or field placement course has become commonplace in American universities. Surprisingly, little has been reported about those programs. Although several articles have been published on undergraduate practicum in Teaching of Psychology over the past several years, these have tended to be case studies, rather than systematic examinations of a national phenomenon. A national survey was recently undertaken to remedy this lack of information.

Several organizing principles guided the development of the survey. The first concerned the degree granting capabilities of the department. An argument can be made that departments with doctoral programs have faculty who are more interested in doing research, or whose jobs require a higher output of publications, than do faculty of undergraduate departments. Such doctoral granting departments might be less likely to initiate a practicum, to allocate fewer resources to it when there is a practicum, and to have fewer staff members involved since supervision of practicum is less likely to lead to successful grants or publications, and may be viewed as less prestigious and less likely to earn promotions.

A second principle concerned size of school, with the anticipation that smaller schools would be more likely to have a practicum program because their small size increases the likelihood that they try to be very attentive to student needs. Size of school was expected to interact with doctoral-non-

doctoral status such that small nondoctoral departments would be most likely to offer a practicum and large doctoral ones least likely to offer a practicum.

A third principle was that urban settings would more likely have a practicum program and they would have more settings and a greater variety of settings in their programs because of availability of agencies.

Because supervision of practicum is an unusual role for academic psychologists, it was anticipated that the role of the faculty in practicum programs might be quite diversified. Questions were asked about supervisory load, teaching credit, reimbursement for travel, decision-making procedures in site selection and student selection, and the number of faculty involved in the practicum program.

Finally, the question of whether a department viewed practicum as a pre-vocational activity or as a liberal arts activity was raised. Respondents were asked to rate the purpose of the practicum. In addition, it was anticipated that departments who adhere to a more traditional liberal arts philosophy would also require more traditional course requirements such as formal class meetings, term papers, and additional readings. It was also expected that such programs would provide more resources for supervisory staff, teaching credit for faculty, and some form of central departmental control over decision making.

Survey Instrument

The four-page survey consisted of 37 multiple choice and open-ended items. It was sent to the department chair at each school in the sample with a cover letter requesting that it be passed along to the department's practicum coordinator or director, if there was such a person (otherwise the chair was asked to complete it). The person completing the form had the option of simply checking a space that indicated they had no practicum program and returning the survey. An identical survey was mailed to non-respondents three weeks after the initial mailing.

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In addition to the survey instrument, additional data about each college/university was obtained from the APA's Graduate Study in Psychology (APA, 1981) and about the school's locale from the 1970 Census.

Selection of the Sample

A sample of 499 schools was selected from a comprehensive list of all U.S. colleges and universities offering the bachelor's degree. This sample was stratified by the size of the college/university (tiny = 1-999 students, small = 1000-4999, medium = 5000-9999, large = 10,000+) and by the region of the country in which it was located (East = New England and Mid-Atlantic states, South = south of the Mason-Dixon line and west to Texas, Midwest = all else east of the Rocky Mountains, and West = west of the Rockies). Thus, there were 16 cells in the sample, each with approximately 31 schools.

Respondents

Of the 499 surveys mailed, 291 were returned and completed by a member of a Psychology Department. A total of 29 surveys were returned with the indication that the school had either no psychology department or no psychology majors. The total return rate was not consistent across cells, with western schools somewhat less likely to respond, and southern and midwestern schools somewhat more likely to do so.

A sample of 48 nonrespondents were telephoned in an attempt to estimate the representativeness of the respondents. Twenty-three percent of the nonrespondents had no psychology department, as opposed to only 9% of respondents. Fifty-seven percent of the nonrespondents claimed to have an undergraduate practicum program, as compared to 65% of respondents. Given the relatively high return rate of the surveys (68% of schools with a psychology department) and the apparent similarity of nonrespondents to respondents, as determined by the follow-up, it seems likely that survey respondents are fairly representative of the entire sample.

Data Analysis

The majority of items used a multiple choice format which did not involve rater decisions. Open ended items from the survey were content analyzed by having two raters develop rating schemes and then scoring responses independently. Satisfactory levels (greater than 80% agreement) of inter-rater reliability were achieved for all items.

Analysis of the data was divided into two parts. The first was a comparison of schools that had a practicum program with those that did not. The second was an effort to comprehensively describe the programs that were reported.

Who Has a Program?

Sixty-five percent (188 of 291) of the respondents claimed to have a practicum program. Because of the structure of the survey it was possible to obtain only a small amount of information about departments that did not have a program. However, enough information was available to permit several interesting comparisons. Departments offering the Ph.D. were significantly less likely to have a practicum program than departments offering only bachelor or masters degrees (Table 1a, $X^2=9.04$, $df=2$, $p<.05$). In addition, departments at smaller schools were found to be more likely to offer a practicum ($F=5.33$, $df=1,285$, $p<.05$). The mean number of students at schools offering Practicum was 6735, while schools without a Practicum had a mean of 8990 students. However, no differences were found based on the size of the psychology department itself, as determined by number of faculty teaching undergraduates or by the number of undergraduate majors. Another interesting observation was that schools in the South were less likely to offer practicum (Table 1b, $X^2=8.87$, $df=3$, $p<.05$). Finally, there were no differences found between schools located in rural settings and those in urban/suburban settings, as determined by the schools' presence in the U.S. Census Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area.

INSERT TABLES 1a AND 1b ABOUT HERE

Characteristics of Practicum Programs

Age and Size of Programs

Practicum programs seem to be a relatively recent phenomenon. Respondents were asked in what year their program had begun. From 168 responses, the range was from 1953 to 1981 (the year of the survey). However, more than 80% indicated a start in 1970 or later, and 38% indicated that their programs had started since 1975.

The size of the programs varied greatly. All respondents with a program indicated they provided placements during the academic year. The number of students enrolled during the academic year ranged from 1 to 200. The median number of students was 15. Few programs were very large, with 75% stating that fewer than 30 students took a practicum during the academic year. Summer programs tended to be smaller, with 78 departments (41% of those with a program) reporting from 1 to 60 summer practicum students. The median number of summer students was 4. More than 75% of the summer programs had 10 or fewer students each summer.

Purposes of the Programs

Respondents were asked to rate four widely discussed purposes of practicum programs on a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). Overall, career development was considered the most important purpose with a mean rating of 4.2. A close second was to "observe in action material taught in other courses" with a mean rating of 3.9. Somewhat less important was "graduate school preparation" with a mean of 3.2 and of very little importance was "in lieu of

a formal course on a topic" with a mean of 1.5. Although offered a choice of "other purposes", few people chose it.

A closer look at these data showed an important difference between departments based on the level of their graduate offerings. Departments with Ph.D. programs considered "Career development" to be significantly less important as a purpose for their practicum programs ($F=4.50$, $df=2,180$, $p<.02$). On a five-point scale the mean for BA schools was 4.4, for MA schools, 4.2, and for Ph.D. schools only 3.8. This is in keeping with what might be considered a more traditional, academic approach to education in psychology.

Faculty Issues

Faculty have two distinct roles in a practicum program. First, they control the program itself. In this role, they select sites and students, and decide on what the general requirements will be that make practicum a credit-worthy activity. Second, they act as faculty supervisors for the practicum students. In this role, they determine the specific requirements for grading, supervise the activities of the students, and in many cases conduct regular classes or seminars.

When considering control of the program, two issues are of interest, how many people exercise control and who they are. When asked who made decisions about such critical issues as site and student selection, almost half (48%) said this was determined solely by an individual faculty member. The remainder of the departments included at least one other person in this process, with 28% reporting that a departmental coordinator made these decisions, 12% reporting that a departmental committee did so, and 8% saying that a college/university level committee made them. The total number of people involved in the program at the department level is also of importance. Respondents were asked how many

people in their department had any involvement at all (e.g., supervision, committee control, etc.) in the program. The median number of faculty involved was 2, with a range of from 1 to 25. However, 36% reported that only a single faculty member was involved, indicating that these programs were essentially individual efforts. Thus, for these departments there are no apparent checks on the academic quality of the practicum experience from any centralized source.

Supervision can be considered the heart of any practicum program, perhaps even the main distinction between practicum and volunteer work. The median number of faculty who acted as supervisors during any one semester or quarter was 1, with a range from 1 to 25. Eighty-eight percent of the programs reported having 3 or fewer faculty supervisors during a typical term. Using data reported on the survey it was possible to calculate the student/faculty ratio for each program in a typical semester or quarter. The median ratio was 4.5 (mean = 6.75), indicating there are a great many programs with a very low faculty supervisory load. Faculty/student ratio was directly related to whether teaching load reduction was provided for practicum supervision. Forty percent of the schools provided no load reduction for faculty. Not surprisingly, those schools that did provide such reduction had higher student/faculty ratios. Schools with load reduction had a mean ratio of 8.8, while those without it had a mean of 3.5 ($t=5.94$, $df=172$, $p<.001$).

Another issue relating to supervision is travel to make on-site visits. Respondents were asked whether their departments paid their travel costs for supervision visits. Only 25% said that full reimbursement was provided for supervisory travel, while 18% received partial reimbursement, and 56% received no travel reimbursement.

A final faculty related issue is the question of liability insurance. Respondents were asked whether their college/university's liability insurance

covered their practicum supervision activities. Two-thirds of the respondents were not certain about their insurance coverage, but 71% believed that they were covered by their college/university. The survey asked if any insurance related incidents had occurred, but none were reported.

Student Issues

Three issues were addressed in the survey that were related to student participation: selection to participate in the practicum, the amount of credit awarded for practicum participation, and course requirements.

Selection. For most schools (90%) practicum is an elective course. Given the small number of faculty supervisors in most programs it seems likely that some kind of selection process would be needed. In fact, almost all (95%) departments used some kind of selection process. Respondents were asked to identify the selection methods they used from a list of 10. As Table 2 shows, the most frequently chosen method was course prerequisites (75%), while the second most widely used was an interview. The mean number of choices was 3.7, with a range from 0 to 8.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Credit. The amount of credit a student could earn toward graduation varied greatly. All schools with a quarter system calendar had their credit hours converted to semester hour equivalents, and all data reported here are therefore semester hours. The median number of credits allowed was 6, with a range from 2 to 24. Thus, in at least a few schools, a student could earn as much as 20% of his/her credit toward graduation through practicum.

Course Requirements. Course requirements varied greatly as well. One question on the survey asked how the number of credit hours was determined for

each practicum experience. There were four types of responses to this. Thirty-seven percent reported that the only basis for determining credit was the amount of time spent on the site. Thus, the more time a student spent at the site, the more credit could be earned (presumably up to some maximum). Thirty-one percent said that the amount of credit was fixed at a certain amount (e.g. a common amount was 3 credits) and that all experiences received that amount of credit. Eight percent reported that the "quality" of the learning experience was a major factor in determining the number of credits received. Thus, if a student could be expected to learn more at a site, more credit would be allowed. Usually other factors were combined with this in the final determination of credits. Finally, 16% said that some unspecified combination of factors was involved, or that a negotiation process between student and faculty determined credit. All schools said that students were required to work a certain number of hours per week on site for each credit hour earned. The mean number of hours per week was 3.1 per semester hour of credit.

In addition to working at the site for a certain number of hours, many schools required their students to participate in classroom activities. Fifty-nine percent reported that they had a formal class meeting for their students. Of these, 62% held weekly meetings, 17% held monthly meetings, and 21% held meetings with some other frequency. Thus, a formal academic experience was an important component of slightly more than half the programs.

Grading. For most students one of the most important elements of any course is the determination of their grade. Traditional grades (A, B, C, etc.) were used by most (74%) of the departments, while the rest used Pass-fail grades only. Respondents were asked to choose from a list of seven grading mechanisms. The most commonly used mechanism was agency supervisor ratings (83% selected this); next was ratings of a student's daily journal (64%), while 34% used self-evaluations, 34% used on-site observations by faculty supervisors, 30% used seminar

participation, 30% used a research paper, and 9% used a variety of "Other" means. Most departments (95%) reported that they used more than one of these grading mechanisms.

A closer look at the grading mechanisms revealed some interesting differences between departments. Of particular interest was the distinction between a research paper and seminar participation on the one hand as more "traditional academic mechanisms," and journals, observations and supervisor ratings as being less so. Schools with graduate programs were significantly less likely to use journals (a less "academic" mechanism) in determining grades (Table 3, $X^2=8.11$, $df=2$, $p<.05$). This was particularly true for Ph.D. granting departments. Similarly, Ph.D. departments were significantly less likely to use on-site faculty observations (another less "academic" mechanism) in determining grades (Table 4, $X^2=6.67$, $df=2$, $p<.05$). Departments in rural locations were more likely to use agency supervisor ratings (Table 5, $X^2=4.68$, $df=1$, $p<.05$). Cross tabulation of the data showed that 55% of the departments used at least one of the two "academic" methods. All but two of these used one of the observational or self-evaluative methods as well.

TABLES 3, 4, 5 ABOUT HERE

Site Issues

Information about the criteria used in the selection of practicum sites was instructive. Respondents were asked to select among 8 site-selection criteria. As Table 6 shows, the most frequently selected criterion was student demand and interest (91%), while the second most used was agency reputation (85%). Distance from campus was a distant third (43%). It is interesting to note that the relatively formal criteria of the professional field of the agency super-

visor and licensure received little consideration, 19% and 13% respectively. This suggests that many departments may be operating their practicum programs on a relatively informal basis.

TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

Although less than half of the departments reported using distance from campus in selecting sites, most sites were close to campus. Forty percent of the departments said that all of their sites were local (within 20 miles of campus). Overall respondents, a mean of 85% of sites were local. On the average, 11% of sites were between 20 and 50 miles away, and only 4% were more than 50 miles from campus. More than half of the departments (51%) had no sites more than 20 miles from campus, and 77% had no sites more than 50 miles away.

Another set of questions asked about the types of placements that each program used. Not surprisingly there was a strong emphasis on mental health settings. Eight-nine percent indicated they used residential treatment settings, while 77% said they used outpatient mental health settings such as community mental health centers. Other types of settings that received heavy use were medical/health settings (66%), schools (60%), and community action and advocacy agencies (60%). Settings receiving relatively low usage included industrial/organizational settings (42%), outpatient correctional settings (34%), and what might be termed "self-contained" settings such as the Washington Center for Learning Alternatives or the Devereaux Foundation that provide a variety of field placement experiences under their direction (16%). The relatively low use of I/O placements is surprising considering the current emphasis by many students on business oriented careers.

A final point of interest when discussing sites is the question of variety. The mean number of types of placements chosen was 4.8, with a range from one to 9 (out of a possible ten including "other").

Problems with Practicum Programs

The final question on the survey asked "What are the major problems you face with practicum?" A total of 216 separate statements were reported from 156 respondents to this question. These statements were content analyzed and divided into 20 response categories. The problem most frequently cited (by 15% of the respondents) was that the program was too time consuming or that there were too many students to supervise. Ten percent cited problems with agency supervisors such as lack of time spent with students or incompetence. Nine percent stated they lacked enough agencies in their local area, while 6% stated that lack of teaching load credit was a problem. Another 6% cited the general low quality of the experience their students received at agencies.

The 20 categories were then pooled along conceptual lines. Twenty-one percent cited a variety of agency problems (including supervision, exploitation of students, etc.); 15% cited student problems (including lack of student interest and transportation problems); 9% cited location problems (not enough sites in the area); 23% cited administrative problems within their college/university and 13% cited lack of support or interest among their colleagues. Only 10% of the respondents stated outright that they had no problems with their practicum program.

Conclusions

Practicum programs are a recent but dramatic development in undergraduate psychology curricula. Most programs have developed in the 1970s. However, this rapid development has also occurred without any apparent consistency of purpose or design or evaluation. Thus, practicum is most noteworthy in its

variety rather than in its consistency. It has grown rapidly without any overriding sense of mission from the profession of psychology.

These are some of the highlights of the results. About two-thirds of psychology departments now have a program. About one-third to one-half of these have an essentially one-person program, and most programs utilize 3 or fewer department members in any capacity. Student faculty ratios are probably lower for practicum than for many other courses, although many practicum programs function without any formal recognition of the teaching load of the supervisors through load reductions or travel reimbursement. Both career development and a more liberal arts orientation of seeing in action the theoretical material of other courses are cited as important purposes of practicum. Graduate school preparation is not a very highly-rated purpose although many of the more recent professional programs in applied psychology value prior mental health employment.

Practicum, like other upper level courses, may not be available to every student with interest. Rather students must complete course prerequisites, interviews and other selection procedures before being admitted. About 3 hours of work at an agency per week are required of students for each 1 hour of credit, with the total amount of credit available determined by such factors as time available, quality of experience, departmental limitations, and student-faculty negotiations. About one half of departments require some form of regular classroom meetings. Grades are typically based on a combination of supervisor ratings, daily journals, papers, on-site visits and seminar participation. About one-half of the programs use neither seminar participation nor research papers in grade determinations, suggesting that for these departments, practicum is a very non-traditional program. Doctoral degree granting departments are more likely to use these more traditional grading mechanisms than other departments.

Site selection is based more on student interests and agency reputation than on the professional field or credentials of the agency supervisor. Programs usually have a variety of sites from which students may choose with inpatient and outpatient mental health facilities being the most common.

The most common problems which programs reported were lack of local administrative support and poor supervision at the agency level.

The overriding conclusion to be drawn from these data is that practicum is different things to different departments. The variety is more striking than the similarities. For a course which sometimes offers large amounts of credit (up to 20% of the total for a few students), there are few consistently found mechanisms of departmental management or quality control. The interests and motivations of one or a very few members of the departments appear to be its mainstay.

Table 1a

Who Has a Program? I

Graduate Program

<u>Practicum Program</u>	<u>BA</u>	<u>MA</u>	<u>Ph.D.</u>
No	45	18	40
Yes	101	45	42

$$\chi^2 = 9.043 \quad df = 2 \quad p < .02$$

Table 1b

Who Has a Program? II

Region

<u>Practicum Program</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>Midwest</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>
No	21	28	42	12
Yes	52	54	47	35

$$\chi^2 = 8.873 \quad df = 3 \quad p < .04$$

Table 2

Selection Methods

<u>Method</u>	<u>% Departments Using</u>
Course Prerequisites	75%
Grades	42%
Interviews	70%
Demonstrated Skills	18%
Previous Experience	30%
Recommendations	24%
Self-Statement	52%
Psychological Tests	2%
Class Standing	58%
Other	17%

Table 3

Use of Journals in Grading

<u>Use Journals</u>	<u>Graduate Program</u>		
	<u>BA</u>	<u>MA</u>	<u>Ph.D.</u>
Yes	73	27	19
No	29	16	22

$$\chi^2 = 8.110 \quad df = 2 \quad p < .02$$

Table 4

Use of On-Site Observations in Grading

<u>Use Observations</u>	<u>Graduate Program</u>		
	<u>BA</u>	<u>MA</u>	<u>Ph.D.</u>
Yes	37	19	7
No	65	24	32

$$\chi^2 = 6.674 \quad df = 2 \quad p < .04$$

Table 5

Use of Agency Ratings in Grading

<u>Use Ratings</u>	<u>Rural</u>	<u>Urban/Suburban</u>
Yes	49	103
No	4	27

$$\chi^2 = 4.678 \quad df = 1 \quad p < .04$$

Table 6

Site Selection Criteria

<u>Criterion</u>	<u>% Departments Using</u>
Degree of Site Supervisor	32%
Agency Reputation	85%
Number of staff at Agency	5%
Student demand/interest	91%
Faculty Supervisor Interests	34%
Distance from Campus	43%
Licensure of Site Supervisor	13%
Prof. Field of Site Supervisor	19%